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Announcer: The Art of Leadership Network

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Carey Nieuwhof: Welcome to the Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. It's so good to be with you today and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership.

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Man, it is the height of spring, just back from a trip to California and Georgia. We got to hang out at the Rethink Leadership Conference, or at the Thrive Conference, in Sacramento. So glad we had a chance to connect and we're doing some special events around the country this year, so stay tuned for that. Hey, today's episode is brought to you by The Art of Team Leadership. If you are sick and tired of dreadful meetings, having a bit of a toxic culture under the surface, and losing your best leaders, visit theartofleadership.com.

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Well, J.D. Greear is here today. He's back in the house. I had him on with Todd Wilson before, but this time is just J.D. and I. We're gonna talk about all of the drama in the Southern Baptist denomination over the last few years, and talk about leading Southern Baptists. We are also going to talk about how multiplication leads to explosive church growth, and we get into the hard part of it too, in this conversation.

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And then we talked about the future of denominations.

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I think you're really going to love this. And hey, also coming up. I've got an episode with Warren Bird and JJ Vasquez, and we are going to talk about multiplication and the future of church planting.

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So if you're a church planter or you thinking of reorienting your church or launching a campus, we got you covered. J.D. Greear is the pastor of Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, and served as the 62nd President of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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He's also the author of several books and speaks at conferences and events around the world under pastor JD's leadership, the summit has grown from plateaued church of three hundred to one of over 12,000. And when you hear the multiplication story, you'll be blown away. He has a bold vision to plant one thousand new churches by the year 2050, and surprise, surprise, spoiler alert, they're ahead of schedule. So we're gonna break that down for you. Think you're really gonna love this episode. If you're new to the podcast hey, welcome. We're glad you're here. For returning listeners, man. Thank you. I know a lot of you have listened since episode one. And if you haven't subscribed yet, please do. We would love for you to do that. And if you enjoy the show, leave a rating and review wherever you listen. Well a few weeks ago, I wrote a blog post on burnout in the church and the stats are pretty challenging.

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Did you know 40% of pastors now show a high risk of burnout? That's an almost 400% increase in the last eight years. The number used to be about 11% and only 22% of pastors. Say, they have any kind of regular support, that means 80% of pastors say, I've got no one to help me. We're near the tipping point on this one, and it's really close to my heart and I would love for you to stop doing ministry alone. You're in the unique position to get a team around you, but you know what, a lot of people struggle with, it's like, well, I don't know how to really build a team. My staff is okay, but they're not great. And we're just talking honestly here and sometimes the volunteers, they're just busy. Well, if you've ever struggled with any of that, you've got to check out my training program, The Art of Team Leadership, I will walk you through a step-by-step process.

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I will walk you through a step-by-step process for finding and developing better leaders. Believe it or not, you've got them. You've just got to develop them and it's not that hard, and also, to create a thriving team culture because a great culture attracts great leaders. So if you're ready to end dreadful meetings with that person,

toxic people ruining your culture, and losing your best leaders. Then it's time for you to check out the art of team leadership. Go to theartofteamleadership.com and from today until May 17th, you can try it out for 30 days for just \$17.00. You get the full 30 days to decide whether it's a fit for you. But that offer is only good until May 17th. And podcast listeners, I'd love for you to check it out at theartofteamleadership.com. Act now and you'll get that special introductory rate for the first month, just \$17.00 to check it out for 30 days theartofteamleadership.com.

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And you know that engagement is crucial for guiding people on faith journeys. But unfortunately, in today's world, it can be a fight to stand out from that noise. Like how do you stand out online? If you ever sent an important email that nobody read or spent time scratching your head about how to use TikTok, you know exactly what I mean. That's where Gloop's free texting service comes in. Do you know texting has a 98% open rate? Response time: average of 90 seconds. Plus you text every day, so you're already a pro. Now email, about 20% for a lot of organizations. And it's no wonder that thousands of churches are making texting a part of their communication strategy and Gloop's texting service is free. Gloop knows how important it is for churches to have access to texting. That's why they're working with kingdom-minded donors to give it to you for free. Takes less than five minutes to set up and send your first text.

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No credit card is required ever. Don't miss out. go to get.gloop.us/texting and you can sign up today. And now my conversation with J.D. Greear.

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J.D. Greear: Well, thank you Carey for having me. Love your stuff.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Well, thank you, and I appreciate what you're doing and I want to start with change. So you've been leading Summit Church for just over 20 years now, which is incredible.

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J.D. Greear: Well, I mean, being very familiar with the podcast, Carey, I think you have a lot of guests on here that that kind of trumpet some of the same themes that I would agree with. We obviously have a rapidly secularizing culture, so the

assumptions that you make, I mean, literally just five, six, seven years ago are fundamentally different. You know, I found that when it comes to certain parts of the Christian message, the more difficult challenging things, it used to be kind of a like, don't ask, don't tell type of approach. Like, I won't bring it up if you don't bring it up. And now it's just because there's so much of a narrative that has been given, whether it's by the media, or by entertainment, actually realized that with most people who were unchurched. I'm starting not on neutral ground. I'm starting at quite the deficit, and I've got to say it, look, you've heard that these are the options, you've heard this is what we believe. This is actually what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to speak with grace and truth.

And so I think that being aware of those dynamics and the assumptions the people in our community make when they step foot inside a church. I don't consider myself that old in ministry, but that's been a change that occurred over my, you know, twenty or so years that's been there.

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Carey Nieuwhof: I want to go back to some of the other ones, but you're in the South. I mean, you're in the Bible belt. Like you're there. So how is it showing up? Is it showing up demographically? Is it showing up in younger generations, all generations? Like where? Where are you detecting it?

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J.D. Greear: Yeah. Good question. Just to be clear, we're in Raleigh-Durham, which is where UNC, Chapel Hill, Duke University are. And so we all kind of think of ourselves as the hole in the Bible belt, where the buckle goes.

Yeah, I mean it's like 80-some percent of our community votes Democratic and that's not typical for a lot of your kind of South, you know. So we're in a very "blue" area, but having said that, you've got that younger generation that assumes that, but really even just I'd say all generations, there's sort of a cultural zeitgeist at the moment and there's some assumptions we used to have that, well, Christians may be a little strict on some things, but they're good people, they're loving people, they're honest people. My perception is, I don't enter conversations with that benefit anymore. I enter as somebody that is like, almost outside of the, you know, the Overton window? Where the set of things that you're allowed to disagree about, they automatically put us outside of that window.

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And we've got to overcome that with whether it's grace or giving reasonable explanations. I just think being aware of that is very helpful, and otherwise if you're naive about it, it ends up you need and just making it worse.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So you see that, what else are you seeing in terms of change?

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, you know, I think the rapid decline in things like attention span and how people intake information. I think sometimes we as Believers probably too quickly try to adapt.

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But you know, I definitely see the focus on how everything as it's gone digital and online that has presented some real challenges to doing the one-another parts of the Body of Christ and to really be a church. We've struggled to try to adapt to that change and also remain faithful to what it means to be a genuine local church.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Where's that showing up for you? The shorter attention span.

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J.D. Greear: Well, not so much in where you think, like, just the sermons. That's obviously something. We find that people actually end up having a decent appetite for that. But just finding how willing people are to skip engagement in the body of Christ. And they just, you know, with Covid, we tried to be on the front. The cutting edge of changing our online strategy.

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And I think those advances are really, really helpful. I think that that season, the lockdown, forced us to get 10 years ahead and overall that was a positive development, but it was just, there was a lot of people that instead of, you know, coming two to three times a month, they would come one to two times a month, and sometimes they just go long stretches. And I'm not, you know, somebody who thinks that you you can't, you know, carry out the body of Christ and be a part of some of these online experiences. But I also know that there definitely is an in-person-ness to these relationships. and it's ultimately a to our church like

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I often will say to our church, look, when my wife and I are apart and I'm traveling, I'll FaceTime her and we have a great time. I'm so thankful for that. But if I'm FaceTiming her and she's in the next room at home every night, then that means that there might be a challenge to our relationship. And so we see people really just, I sit at home on my couch and we're seeing this just kind of rapid isolation of atomization. I think is the word I've heard a lot, just of people and it's showing them not just in spiritual and religious contexts, it shows up in how people are, you know, engaging with the opposite sex and how they form friendships. It's just every metric is kind of down and I think that certainly affected the church too

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Carey Nieuwhof: I am curious about you as a leader, because one of the things I was tracking, even as recently as today is I've found, and it could be, I've come off like a month-long of having a cold or whatever. But I've seen this trend generally, my own attention span is not what it used to be. I'm reading a book for the purpose of endorsing it, and I'm like, okay, I think I got like twenty pages in me right now. And that's about it. And I don't know, there's an atomization, I like that term, of my own attention span. Have you noticed anything internal like that or you're just hyper-disciplined and you haven't noticed a change?

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J.D. Greear: Well now that you phrase it that way, I'm thinking, man, have I gotten like that? You know, honestly, I'm turning 50 next year. So there are all these changes that are happening in every part of my energy, and so I need to reflect on that, Carey. I need to say, is that because I'm getting older or is that because the media is changing my attention span?

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But, reading and that type of stuff for me, it's always been like a muscle that, the moment I stopped using it, I could quickly get out of shape. I'll get back into it, and if I've gone through a couple of seasons where I didn't read as much as I would like to, and then getting back into it, it's like, alright, a 20-minute spot is enough, and then it gradually gets longer.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Fair enough. Well, your church has really focused on reaching the next-gen we touched on it briefly. But what are some trends you're seeing among the next generation, or even innovations that you are working on to better connect

with younger Millennials and Gen Z? Yeah, it's interesting because I've never really thought of our churches, that Innovative meaning

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, it's interesting because I've never really thought of our church as that innovative. Meaning that's been a tool that we've tried to use to access people but it's never been what we really led with.

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When I look, I'll see, because there are certain things I'll kind of in retrospect see like, hey, that was actually a really good adaptation for reaching people. They were really done with that kind of as a second thought. I think that what C.S. Lewis said that, he never really tried to be original. He just tried to state the old doctrines as plainly as possible for British people in the 1950s and somehow that came off as really novel.

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And so when I think about how we've reached this next generation, I'm like, well I just feel like we tried to make it as plain as possible to them and

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And that made us stumble into innovations. I mean this to be as ridiculous as it sounds. But, I thought we kind of invented multi-site, which is not at all true. I mean, not even by a decade. And I just was I wasn't aware. But I thought, oh, we could do this, we could put this here...and then come to find out as I start, you know, investigating it, like a lot of people have been doing this for a long time and they've been really effective at it. But it's just an example of how like, okay, is it easier rather than building one big gargantuan Six-Flags-over-Jesus kind of building and having people drive 40 minutes to it. How can we tell people to stay where they are, serve where they live, and be the church in that community? You know, I like to think of us as a very plain church we have, you know, worship, prayer, and somebody stands up, opens the Bible and just tries to say, this is what it means, and this is how it changes your life. I find that especially for college students, there is a high desire to see.

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The way I say it is, I just got to give the whole ball of crazy upfront. I'm not trying to show "there are three things to make your life better." I want to teach through the scope of scripture and show how there's a completely different approach to life and

reality, and a completely different story that's being told. And so again, it's not that innovative, it's just kind of what it is, and it's connected with a lot of very hungry, young professionals and students here. And by God's grace we've seen a lot of people profess faith in Christ.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Well, I think there's one thing I've seen emerging as a trend with Gen Z in particular, it's stripped down, its hope overhype. It's

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It's simple, clear, direct, and personal that seems to be resonating. Now, last time you were on, you shared a vision to plant 1,000 churches by 2050. So you've got a few decades left. You were at about I think 300 or so. And then we had a global pandemic shut down, and all the craziness sort of intervened since then. What's changed in that vision, if anything? And how is that progressing or advancing at this point JD?

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, I appreciate you remember that. We're on number 511, so it's progressing. When I first got here, in fact I was just talking to one of our campus pastors who's been here for about a decade and he said, "when I first came in and heard that thousand churches vision, I thought that was huge and insurmountable." He said, "but now it just feels like if anything, because of the power of multiplication and because of how the church grows, it's pretty clear that's going to be too small of a goal."

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He's actually leaving as one of our campus pastors to go and plant. He's taken a couple dozen of our people to go plant church over in a part of Southeast Asia, in one of the big cities over there. And he said, it's just, you know, as we've seen kind of that slow process of multiplication where churches plant churches, when every church is planted with the view of multiplication in mind it, it happens quicker than you think it will. I read this book recently or it's it's an action older book. But by Rodney Stark, the church historian, he actually passed away a few years ago, he was at Baylor.

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But in one of his books, I think it was *The Rise of Christianity*. He said, from our best estimates, the total number of Christians that were in the world at the end of the

first century, 99 AD was about 7,500. Which, I don't know. You think like, okay, let's give him a thousand on either side for him to be off, that's not that many. After all the apostles are dead and passed on, there's less Christians total in the world than there are you know at less than many of the churches you know that gather every Sunday just right here. and listen like

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Carey Nieuwhof: Like, less than a hockey arena, let alone a football stadium.

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, absolutely. So you think that, I mean by the time you get to the end of the second century, Tertullian describes the church as geographically broad but still numerically insignificant.

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And then by the time you get to what 312 AD, those historians, Roman historians, are saying there are so many Christians, it's like more than 50% of the Roman Empire. We're talking millions and millions and millions and Rodney Stark says, how did that happen? He said, where you go from, you know, 7500 Christians in 99 AD, to where more than half the Roman Empire's that way in 312 AD, and he gives several factors that were at play. But the one that really stood out to me is he said it really is just the mathematical principles of multiplication. And it takes a little bit of time for them to kick in, but then you really just see it multiply. And I think of that based on our context here, because in the last, you know, 100 years or so, Carey, we've had bigger churches in America than the apostles would ever have dreamed of.

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You know, Billy Graham has preached to larger audiences, and I'm all for that. I'm not a megachurch hater, obviously. And I love large evangelistic events. But during that time that we've seen bigger audiences than the apostles ever dreamed of, we've seen the percentage of Americans in church every weekend go down, not up. And so when we think about it from that perspective, you're like, again, I'm not anti-megachurch. But is it possible that all this stuff that we're thinking will grow the church is not actually what grows the church and what grows it are what they were doing in those first, second, and third centuries? And Rodney Stark basically says it this way. He says, what they had that we don't have anymore is this awareness.

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That every Christian was called to multiply and every church was called to plant other churches. And he said that did more than all the other things, you know, that we have today that they didn't have. And that's what I think explains what's happened with us with that vision of a thousand churches, it's just we're seeing these powers of multiplication, I think we'll cross 1,000 within five years and then, I mean, maybe that number needs to be 10,000 by 2050.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So let's break that down a little bit because I think we talked about it. We touched on it briefly the last time you were on with Todd Wilson. But I really want to break it down because I think the instinctive reaction for a lot of pastors, because most churches are struggling, or even churches that are thriving right now is I'll give you a couple of scenarios.

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One pastor says, okay, we're growing, you know, but we're small. And if I give away my best, people I'm going to have nobody left, and then there's another church. Let's say they're close to breaking 1,000 and they've clawed back from the pandemic and they're exhausted. And now they got a full room again, but they're like, wait, wait wait. Here's what you don't understand, J.D., it took me so many years to get here, I'm just afraid of losing people and then we've got to start over again. If we get rid of our best leaders, where are those other leaders going to come from? I mean, this is something you have been through numerous times with your own locations and was sending people out around the world. Last time we talked, there was someone else you planted, and I think they beat you on the outreach list, or whatever. The Outreach 100 list or something like that. So, you've dealt with that, and you probably had those internal fears, concerns, and worries yourself. So, what would you say to those church leaders who are like, we can't afford to multiply

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J.D. Greear: Yeah. Well, first of all, I feel that. And just to put all the cards on the table. The kind of people that step up and volunteer to go on church plants are never "sideline people." You know? They don't say, hey, I'm disengaged from the mission here, but I'm ready to go on a church plant. It's your core.

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Carey Nieuwhof: "I wasn't giving much, I wasn't serving, but I'm gonna go lead." No, these are your best people.

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J.D. Greear: But I'm gonna be radically generous now and move. No transformation by aviation. But you know, because of that, we've had to say goodbye. Sometimes we'll joke that being in our church feels like trying to hug a parade sometimes. By the time I get to know somebody, they leave.

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But what we've seen is, it really is, there's a thing called "the heresy of sequentialism." I actually first heard it from a guy named David Garrison, who was one of the most prolific church planters over in Asia. And he said that Americans, in particular, commit this heresy of sequentialism by treating the Christian life as if you kind of go 101, 201, 301, 401, and then multiplication, sharing Christ, that's your 401 level. He said, "You look at the New Testament and you find that Jesus put the reproduction in the multiplication down at the first level, you know? So, it's go home and tell your friends the great things the Lord has done for you. The woman in John 4, she immediately goes out and begins to bring people back, and so we say that for a church it's like, you can't afford to wait until you're at 2,000 people.

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Now and at this state, you think, oh at 2,000 we're going to have all this excess money and stuff, and we're going to be ready to give it away. You've got to build that in from the beginning because it actually creates healthy discipleship. It creates the right leadership dynamics. And so we just, from the beginning, said look we're going to give away more than we think we can. What's ironic, Carey, is we as pastors, for pastors that are listening, we all know how to teach this to our people regarding money. No pastor ever says, hey, if you got excess money sitting right in your bank account, you should give that away.

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You give God your first and your best and then and then what you find, and this is true, is he really does multiply. He multiplies your provisions back to you. Why would we say that with our money and not do that with our leadership? We give God the first in the best of our leadership. And I'm just telling you, you cannot out-give God. I find for every one we send out, there's three more that pop up in their place. And I think there are both natural and supernatural reasons for that. You know, the supernatural reasons are God just multiplies it because like he does the five loaves and the two fish. But the natural reasons are, I mean, several secular leadership people pointing this out. Liz Wiseman wrote that book Multipliers, and

she talks about the leaders that attract other leaders are those that demonstrate with their organization that they are committed, not to having people as cogs in their machine, but you're committed to their development. And that means when it's time for them to step outside of your organization and go.

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And that means when it's time for them to step outside of your organization and go, they see you blessing them and sending them, and that creates this magnet for other leaders who want to be in that kind of environment. She uses Jack Welch as an example because I think in his heyday at GE that you could look out across the Fortune 500 companies and there was this absurd number of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies who had come off of Jack Welch's staff. And she says, now you might be tempted to look at that and say, oh well, he couldn't keep good talent but she said it's actually the opposite. It's that because he was committed to, when it was time, sending those men and women out, it created this desire of people. You fought to get on Jack Welch's staff because you knew that you were going to be developed and that includes sending out. And so that's what I would say to that pastor of the small church, the church of 1000, yeah, I understand you feel like you can't afford to give it away but you know, in a kingdom sense, you can't afford not to.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So is this something you have to tell yourself again and again to remind yourself or is this like do you have to have an internal narrative every time it's time to start a new location, send someone off, plant church number 512, or whatever number you're at right now. Do you win this battle or is it a constant tension? I think is my question JD.

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J.D. Greear: It's literally happening right now, Carey, as we're having this conversation, I'm self-reminding. Earlier today, when I sat with this campus pastor, there was a larger meeting of all our campus pastors. And I'm hearing this guy talk to me about who he's got on his team, I felt it again, like, "Oh, not that person."

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And I mean, he's taking big givers and really talented people. And I just have to say, okay, this is not my church, and the worst possible thing that I can do for this church, or even for my own soul, is to close my selfish cold hands around this and say this is mine. And everything in my flesh, Carey, everything just wants to hold on. I mean, I got into ministry for mostly godly reasons, but you know, I think you and

I've talked about this before. Ministry ends up being a great place for people with the idol of success to hide, because you cloak everything that you are doing as doing it for Jesus, when it's actually for you. I fight that. Death to my flesh is, I feel like, I never graduated from that. I don't suppose I ever will.

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Carey Nieuwhof: That was actually later down in my question. So I want to lift that up. Ministry is a great place for guys with the idol of success to hide, because you can cloak all your ambition in spiritual language. It's like, "oh, I did this all for God." When really, it's been a lot about me. I'm turning 58 this week, and I think about motives more than any time I ever have in my life. And I don't think I score well in that, to be honest with you. I don't know that I'm succeeding in that area. I want to talk about why. Because, that's another thing that I'm very sensitive to these days, is just people using spiritual language around selfish ambition. Just really gets my radar going.

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Talk about how you came up to that insight. Like how did you stumble on that? And then how does that play out, that this becomes a great place to hide in the church for selfish ambition,

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J.D. Greear: I think it was St. Augustine who said that emotions like anxiety, and fear, and worry, and jealousy, that they're like smoke that's coming from a fire. And when you see the smoke, you should trace the trail of smoke back to the fire. The worst thing to do is just wave the smoke away because he said, these fires are idols that you're worshiping at, and these emotions are the sign. So for me, it was fairly early on in my ministry 4-5 years into it, I just really

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I mean, I just dealt with some pretty severe jealousy of other people. Nothing that got to the point that I was like, you know, like vandalizing their churches, but just you know, like "Why wasn't I invited to speak at that conference?" You know, "Why did they get that? Why does..." and you know it's hard to even verbalize this, admit it, but, you delight in somebody's failure when you hear something that happens. And I remember just having this one day where it was like, this like, what is wrong with your heart? Because now this guy has destroyed his family. You know, because of a failure, he's hurt all these people's faith. And your first emotion was kind of, "Alright, now I don't have to worry about that guy," you know.

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And it just feels like, I imagine some of your listeners are like, I'm not sure this guy should be in ministry, but I mean I'm just telling you, that was what was in my heart.

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Carey Nieuwhof: You're just being honest. I've had those thoughts, too.

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J.D. Greear: Yeah like why is that? And it came to a head really, one afternoon, I had set aside a day for prayer and fasting and trying to ask God, would you send revival to Raleigh-Durham? I mean, just the kind that in a hundred years from now, they'd write about it. And I don't have a whole lot of times where I feel like God is speaking to me every day and, you know, writing things in the sky, speaking of my alphabet soup or whatever, but it was one of those moments where God spoke really, really clearly. As loud as if it had been audible, and what the Holy Spirit said was like, alright, what if I say yes to that prayer? And what if I send a revival to the triangle, the Raleigh-Durham area, the kind that will change the landscape of the city.

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But what if your church didn't get any bigger?

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And what if I do the church down the road, what if their church gets bigger, and their Pastor gets famous, and you never get a mention in the history books, do you still want me to do it? Now, Carey, I know the right answer, right?

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Yes, Lord, you must increase and I must decrease. I know that's the answer but that wouldn't have been the real answer. It was like, I'm not okay with that, you know because somehow in this "thy kingdom come," right behind that has always been, "my kingdom come". And you know, it makes a better story if, on that day, I wrote something down and lit a fire and buried it, and I've never struggled with it again, but really that just started a process of repentance. A posture I still find myself in today.

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I think of Martin Luther, how he always said, "The whole of the Christian life is a posture of repentance." And I will still feel, now maybe not to the same degree, I do think there's been some progress and grace. But I still feel some of those things and I have to say, okay, what is this, who is this for? And whose name is this about? And die to my flesh all over again. Paul Tripp told me recently, you know Paul Tripp, he's the Christian counselor. And I was just asking him about these guys. Men and women who just have these spectacular failures. And you sort of talked about them here in your podcast. But I said, "What do these guys have in common?" What do these men and women have in common because he's known some of them up close. And he said, well, he said, there are two things I see. He said, number one is they began to lack peer community.

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He said, I don't mean community, because these people are usually extroverts. They always have people around them. But I mean the kind of people that are just, they're not impressed with you, they don't work for you and they will tell you the truth. He said, that's number one. He said, number two is, and this compounds the first one is, he says, they forget the power of indwelling sin. He said, they think that they've learned enough and been successful enough that they no longer have to fight that battle they used to fight in their earliest days of Christianity, which is just dying to the flesh. And he said, because of that, you add that to the first one and then it just grows into this monster that they don't even know, is really there. I mean, the Apostle Paul in Romans 7 is just like, I'm convinced, in my flesh, as an apostle, there's nothing good there. And I wrestle with this, and I hate it.

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And when God has been gracious to me and I've got the right friendships in my life. I can still see that same proud kid that was, you know so concerned with who the cheerleaders were looking at when he was out on the basketball court, there's a version of that guy that stands up in the pulpit every week. And I have to, you know, just maintain a posture of repentance and say, Lord, you know, I need to be about your glory and not mine. Help me to actually believe that with my heart.

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Carey Nieuwhof: I really appreciate you talking about that. And I think, when I look at you planting ahead of schedule, you've got this big vision that by 2050 you're going to have 1,000 churches, you're ahead of it and you keep releasing.

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I think that's a great mark of leadership. Because the other thing would be to let the voices, the fears, the insecurities win and say, well, we're gonna slow down a little bit. We've got 27 years. Whoa. Slow down a little bit, you know, we'll do most of them in the 2040's. In the meantime, I'm gonna hang onto my top donors. Does it create that dynamic? Do you ever get people tapping you on the shoulder, knocking on your door, going, "we're giving away our best stuff here. What are you doing?" Like what kind of strategy, or is that more of an internal battle? Do you exhaust your leadership team going, "oh, I got to recruit for kids ministry again, and now I gotta recruit for worship leaders." You know, which apparently is now trademarked. Nevermind. I totally saw that article. That's right. I owe somebody money. Um.

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So like does your team get exhausted by it sometimes?

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, and just to be transparent, cause I don't want to create any unrealistic expectations to anybody listening. I mean there are healthy ways to do it and there are unhealthy ways. The same way, if somebody comes to you and says, "I really want to give to the gospel. I'm giving away my entire paycheck," you're like, well, you need to make sure you can feed your family. So we've had to learn to create certain guidelines. When we have a planter that leaves our staff, which we have usually 1-2 a year off of our staff, a major staff member, that will leave. You know, we try to say there are healthy ways and unhealthy ways to do this, some of which are not sustainable. Give you a real practical example: our church has been historically a very white church. Over the last several years by God's grace, we've really grown in ethnic diversity.

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And part of that has been the cultivation of certain leaders of color who are just, I mean, they are killing it on our staff. Well, when somebody leaves to plant a church they think "Well, I want to plant a multi-ethnic church. I'm going to take that guy or that girl." And certainly, they're free to go if that's what God's calling them to do.

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But it's a little bit too low-hanging fruit to say, hey, that's something that is being cultivated.

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So you need to begin to form relationships like that on your own. That would be an example. A second example is we say that a campus pastor, because for us, they are the first line of pastoral ministry. And if we know somebody's thinking about going out and planting, we just say that's not the role for you.

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It's better for you to be an associate at the campus because it's just too chaotic for our church to say ok, here's my pastor, and then every three years, I've got to switch to a new one.

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So there's some best practices. And I just want to be clear because I don't want somebody to think that we just empty out our executive team every two to three years, but, having said that, we just had a conversation today about a couple of staff members, because our church planting pastor just really challenged me. He said "I feel like it's time." And I was like, not them! We gotta hang onto them! And he said, no, I think it's time. And he was right. And so, yeah, that was hard. It's going to be hard for all the people. What's even worse is I'm the one that sends them the letter that just says, not only am I blessing you in this quest. I'm actually encouraging you to consider whether God might be calling you to this, because we see in you the qualities that could make for a successful planner.

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And that's hard for me, and it's hard for the staff around them. But we know as long the Holy Spirit is at work and we're keeping the vision in front, over time, after the Band-Aid's been ripped off, you kind of say, yeah. I was just in a church this past weekend that took a few of our most beloved people. And man, they're reaching so many people now in this city, I stood up there and I'm like, okay this is definitely worth it. I miss that guy, I miss serving with him, but this you know, what's having them to be like when we see the fruit of all that?

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Carey Nieuwhof: So before I move on, I want to talk a little more about multiplication. Because we talked about this a little bit with Todd last time but you know, there's addition, subtraction, stagnation, I guess, and then multiplication.

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So I want you to think through and I think Stark's observations that you talked about, that the only explanation to go from 7,500 to half the Roman Empire in two

centuries was basically the path of multiplication. But multiplication seems to create, it feels like subtraction when you're the sending church, right? But it's not. There is a regenerative. It's not like your original campus is down to the last 18 people. You've been very, very strong in that respect. Your campuses are staffed, and everything seems to grow. There seems to be compounding, multiplying impact there. Can you explain a little bit more for people who would be suspect or afraid or worried if they embrace that, how multiplication seems to really increase everything?

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Yeah. Well you know, Peter Drucker, the leadership guy. The guy who used to always say "Culture eats strategy for breakfast," it's one of his most famous statements. And you know, it's a mistake to say. Okay. I'm just gonna take the strategy and lay it on top of a church and think that it's going to work and be healthy for the church that you know, what we are seeing now is honestly the result of a decade or so of a building that culture to now that's flowering in some of these things. Um. I think that culture once it begins to pervade from top to bottom, people begin to see that, yes, it's movement,, and it provides excitement, and it's something that I really want to be a part of. Just a few weeks ago I had lunch with one of our campus elders that'S not on staff, but he's a campus elder. He's been leading a small group for 11 years.

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He said, "I've been leading this small group for 11 years," and I said, "Oh, that's amazing."

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He's said, "We have 10 people in it right now. Over the 11 years, we've had 150 people in that small group." And I kind of looked at him sideways. And he said, "My wife and I keep very detailed records of all the people in the small group. Of the 150 that have been in our small group 10 are in now. One of that 150 just stopped coming to the small group, stopped coming to the church. The other 139 have been sent out from our small group, either to be a part of a church plant or to plant another small group." And his kind of excitement over being able to see and be a part of that.

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I hate to use the term lowest level. But at the lowest level of a small group, when you're seeing that kind of excitement that comes out of multiplication, that creates a

culture that makes it a lot easier for a church to do that. We do fight, you know, as a big mega-church, we find the "Country Club" thing, and I fight it, you know, just what's it like to be comfortable. But, when the spirit of God is moving among a people, nothing brings joy quite as much as seeing and hearing reports of people coming to Christ and seeing in the gospel go forward. So if it's left up to my leadership, and I hope this doesn't sound like false humility, the direction of my heart will take it toward Country Club but as God is gracious to us, and keeping the Great Commission in front of us, and as the church believes that, and we hold each other accountable, I think it's sustainable and I hope it's something we can do 'til I'm either dead or retired.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So you wear a few hats. And for a few years, you were President of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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J.D. Greear: Oh yeah, that hat.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Easy years. I think you didn't have a lot of challenges during your presidency.

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J.D. Greear: That's right. Yeah. Those three years were the longest thirty years of my life.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So let's go there. Let's talk about some of the challenges of leading Southern Baptists through this unbelievably difficult season. And you can take that wherever you'd like, J.D..

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J.D. Greear: Yeah. Well I mean, you know, one of the things that really defined the presidency was, you know, our response to sexual abuse stuff that was happening. You know, it was really by God's grace, when I became President, I was aware that there were some things we were hearing that were concerning.

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And so I launched this task force, it's about six months after that, this kind of article comes out in the Houston Chronicle that just details, "Hey, there are some things that are not being reported properly." Now, I mean, let me be clear, the vast majority of 46,000 Southern Baptist churches, when I say the vast majority, I mean the vast majority. I mean they're just faithful pastors and leaders that love their people and I'm mortified at the thought of something like this happening and they're not trying to protect people in power, but there was enough there that, it was heartbreaking to hear some of these stories. Certainly, that's not the kind of thing you ever check off and move on from. But I think there's been a national conversation, even larger than the SBC that's been really, really good to say.

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There's a tendency for people in power to protect other people in power. And of all people, Carey, we should have known because Jesus says, "Into the flock, wolves are going to come" and the wolves are going to try to devour the flock. And we should have known that we needed better safeguards to make sure that those wolves would not be protected or sheltered to be able to hide. So that was one thing. I feel like that's a hard thing to say and then say, "and number two."

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Carey Nieuwhof: Before you go to number two though. And again, to the extent that you're comfortable. There must have been, and I think back to one of my, I don't want to name names, but one of my earliest experiences, when I was a Seminary student, was a pastor who ended up in an inappropriate sexual relationship with someone he was counseling.

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And I watched this happen when I'm in my twenties and I remember the action my denominational leader took was, okay we won't really deal with this. We'll just remove this pastor and put him somewhere on one of the coasts, where hopefully he gets the writing on the wall and starts over again. And I remember being insensed by that. And you know, young, not even ordained guy goes up and challenges the regional governing guy who made the decision. And I'm like, how could you possibly do that? And he just said, well, one day you'll understand.

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I still don't understand. I don't get it. It's wrong. Did you get, like there must have been pressure to keep it covered up. Or there must have been pressure to protect the people involved.

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How did you counter that or deal with that? Or did people kind of realize? No, this is a different age and we gotta take responsibility.

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J.D. Greear: It's still, and you just be transparent, some of these questions they get a little complex, you know, because it's cloaked in things that feel like Christian virtues sometimes. I mean, explain what I mean.

Carey Nieuwhof: We have to protect the church.

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, that's right. We know that there are people who would like to discredit and smear the church. And that certainly is a lot of motive and you don't want to play into their hands. And are they the ones setting the agenda? Then you've got this concept of grace, and we all, we love grace, and God can forgive and restore and we love to see people restored. And so you think, well, you know, so and so did this, but they seem to me to be pretty sorry. Let's put him back in leadership as a celebration of God's grace.

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And listen, I believe in God's grace, and I believe in his power, but there are certain sins that once you commit them, if you use your power as a pastor to sin, then yes, you can be forgiven, but because of what it does to the victims, the people you sinned against, you can never again be in a position of power like that. And so people, they didn't understand that. They thought they were actually highlighting Grace when they were perpetuating people that were able to abuse. The concept of the benefit of the doubt. I mean, that's something we cherish as Christians. You know, I want to, you know, Carey, for you I want to give you the benefit of the doubt. If somebody says something about you, I want to say well, you know, I know Carey, I'm gonna wait till that's proven. That's a good concept. But the flip side of that is, well, what about the person who is making the accusation? They kind of need the benefit of the doubt too.

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And so, how do I take an accusation against somebody that I like and want to give them the benefit of the doubt, but also give this, in many cases a woman, who is coming forward very broken, and say, how do I honor her with the same, if not more, you know, honor that I'm trying to give to my other

person in leadership? There was a guy who spoke. I'm gonna say it was prophetic. You are talking to a Southern Baptists, so you know.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, you gotta be careful with that.

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J.D. Greear: I'm still gonna say it's prophetic. He just, in this process he said, you're gonna make mistakes. He said, err on the side of the victim, not the institution. And I think that was prophetic because I don't think we ever what we don't want to make any mistakes. And we certainly don't say, you know, people are guilty before proven guilty.

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But you want to say, we want to be a safe place and we want to recognize that, yeah, statistically, this is happening. And this needs to be a place that people can come as a refuge. That's part of what it means to represent the gospel.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Thank you. I appreciate you sharing on that. So I mean, this isn't an exhaustive treatment of that, but there was that issue when you were president, you are moving on to number two. What were some of the other challenges that you were dealing with

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J.D. Greear: Well, we went through, obviously, the covid stuff. George Floyd, that was a really, and I've heard you talk about on your podcast wonderfully with several guests, but that was a very challenging time for everybody.

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And what became apparent just first of all in my own church, was that a lot of the unity that we had experienced, it was not really battle-tested. It's kind of like, you know, a ship. You don't really know how strong it is. So it goes through a hurricane and there were a lot of things that we assumed we were together on that suddenly. Just and that year, just reveal these cracks and fissures and like many pastors, I was like, "Am I gonna be able to keep this thing together?" I lost friends. I'd walked with them through tragedy and married their kids, I mean, and they're leaving because I

said too much about George Floyd. I didn't say enough about George Floyd. I you know, we

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We took off the mask too quickly. We didn't wear them long enough. Whatever it was and and it just it became apparent that for a lot of people, their first identification was more political than it was in the Body of Christ. I'm not a non-political guy. I think we ought to carry our Christian worldview into every discussion, but I know as a church, and as the Body of Christ, it's like I've got a unity that supersedes and allows for some disagreement in those things. And it just became apparent that that was not true for a lot of people. That they could not be unified with somebody that did not think with uniformity on a lot of those issues. It was almost ironic because we Christians rail against cancel culture. It was shocking how many people canceled their church because of disagreement. And I just was like, I don't understand this. And that was painful. And then, so you take that from a local church now, and you extrapolate it out to the SBC.

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And as a whole there was a lot of tension and trying to say, what's the basis of our unity really about? And are we gospel, Great Commission people? The good news is, and I hope you won't hear this as any kind of like, positive spin, but I always felt like there were two Southern Baptist Conventions.

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There was the Twitter Southern Baptist Convention, and then there was the real Southern Baptist Convention. And I would be on social media, and I'd be going to see, think some of these more like, you know, rural kind of country type of... we're just talking to the "red" state. Deep "red" state SBC.

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And I would think, okay, I'm going into there and based on what I see on social media, I am not going to be well-received.

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Because you know they really want us to be culture warriors based on social media. I would get there and I would find that it was a bunch of pastors who loved me, loved each other. They're just trying to reach people for Christ and it was like this little group was so loud that they dominated the airwaves that had obscured the vast majority of people who just love Jesus, love people, and wanted to complete the

great commission. It sort of felt like, I probably get in trouble for saying this, but it's sort of like the Wizard of Oz scene where, the big old voice and they pull back the curtain and you're like, wait, just a little old man? How was that guy making all that noise? And that's sort of what it felt like. I even feel now, and I understand when people, they kind of see what certain leaders and people say then they'll identify it with the SPC. I'm like look

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I'm like, look, I recognize that at least for me when I got elected as President, I felt like it was the vast majority of the people in the pews and pastors, these 46,000 pastors that wanted our convention to be about the gospel. They wanted it to be about the Great Commission. And not about ethnic uniformity or political lockstep. And I kept thinking like, there was several times, Carey, where you're almost like, it's not worth a fight. I just wanna, "Fine, you can have it. I don't need to win this. I'll just go back to my church". And I kept thinking, no. These people are depending on me.

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These people are depending on me to stand up to this group because they're like, "We need you to stand here and fight in this. And not let those people have this convention." Because they don't want their convention to be about that. And sometimes I feel like it's easy for a leader to get tired of the fight and withdraw, but they're not thinking about the sheep that they're leaving behind, who they're just basically abandoning to the wolves. Because when the wolf is attacking the shepherd, and the shepherd says, fine that's not worth it, and just leaves, then you just leave the flock to the wolves. So, several times I felt, and still feel now, there are a lot of faithful Believers in churches that are depending on the right leaders maintaining the conversation and taking it where it needs to go so that it's not commandeered by people that want to take it a different direction.

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I mean, famous statement by Edmund Burke, "all that is necessary for evil to prevail is for good people to do nothing." And not trying to say I'm one of the good guys per se. It's just to say that I think leaders have to be willing to engage in these for the sake of for the sake of the Great Commission because leadership is hard and it's just always going to draw people out who want to take things the other way. And if you got into it because you love accolades and smooth sailing and peace, then, I don't know what you were thinking you were going to leave, but it wasn't people.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Your comment about the two SBCs. The Twitter and the real, is actually borne out in the research. So I think he's at Duke, I could be wrong. So not that far from you, but Chris Bail, I had them on

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I think maybe last year, we'll link to it in the show notes. His book Breaking the Social Media Prism, makes a very similar claim that something like a single digit 13% percent of the users drive 90% percent of the extremity online. You know, extreme views, extreme opinions, and I can see how that would happen even in a domination. Where the loudest voices may get control, but they're not necessarily representative. And his argument is most people are in the middle. Most people aren't strongly opined one way or the other. They're just sort of, "Yeah, I'm moderately right-wing or moderately left-wing or I'm in the middle." But it's the extreme set of hijack, the polarized public discourse that we have so that seems to be consistent with what you saw in your tour of the SBC during your presidency. That's right. Yeah. Absolutely. And I would just add to that like.

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J.D. Greear: That's right. Yeah. Absolutely. And I would just add to that. That extreme group wants that tone to be over the whole conversation, and if you're not willing to adopt that tone then somehow that means that you're unfaithful. I just always want to say, let me just make sure I'm really clear about this, when it comes to unpopular controversial things that the Bible teaches, I mean, a commitment to the sanctity of life. The sanctity of marriage. That God's design for gender, and man and woman, and even, you know, core doctrines like the exclusivity of Christ and the inerrancy of the Bible.

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I mean those are things that yes we want to be really, really clear on, and if we can't stand together in unity on that, then we might need to go our separate ways.

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But when it comes to things like the best way to fix our education system or the proper policing techniques or

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You know, any number, healthcare, global warming. It's like, yes, I actually actually have very strong opinions on all their subjects we just named. And I think I'm right. If I didn't think I was right, I wouldn't hold those opinions, but I don't believe this ought to define the church. And I just recently, in fact, we were talking right before we started recording. I was thinking about a person who just came to faith in Christ here who described herself as part of the secular left. A writer for the New York Times and a professor at one of our local universities. And I know that if we became identified with a secondary set of political or cultural things, if we become identified by that, then she's never stepping foot in our church.

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And when I see her, and see how she's come to Christ, and how she's growing, and we have hard conversations. We talk about hard truths. But I'm like, she's worth it. She's worth it to say, I'm going to keep the gospel and the central doctrines of Christianity. I'm going to keep those essential. And I'm going to keep secondary things where they belong, which is in secondary conversations. Important and needs to be talked about, but not as part of the identification of the Church or the gospel itself.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. And that's sort of where you're going with your new book, right? Essential Christianity. You're like, there are a few things we really need to talk about then the rest is sort of secondary. For the average pastor trying to moderate that conversation in his or her church. How do you help them?

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Because you're always going to have people emailing you, texting you, tapping you on the shoulder going, "Yeah. But this is essential. What is your opinion on...?" And they'll start giving you a really hard time. How would you encourage them to tell people, "Yeah. But this isn't essential." Is there a filter you use? How do you navigate that in your own church?

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J.D. Greear: Yeah, so historically you can kind of look through the history of the church and just see that there are certain things that comprise historic Christian doctrine. There are certain things that are contemporary discussions. There are certain things that are now controversial that didn't used to be controversial. There

are new questions that sometimes need very definitive answers to them. We see that in Acts 15 and they came together to try to answer some key questions.

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You know, I did part of my Ph.D. in the history of doctrine and its development in the church. And part of what you see is that these Creeds are written always in the context of whatever is controversial at the time. So, in our day, questions of gender and marriage, yeah maybe that wasn't in the Apostles Creed, but that doesn't mean that it's not essential, because it wasn't controversial in 300 AD but it is controversial now, and so we have to be clear on that. So I don't mean just trying to dumb it down to five statements that everybody can nod their head on. But I do think that as you get into and you saturate yourself in the New Testament, you find that there are things that are first-tier

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Then there are things that you just say, "Man, for the sake of the unity of Christ. I think we can allow disagreement on that. Even though your position on that drives me crazy, and I think it's wrong." I always love Paul in Romans 14. When he presents the whole meeting question. you know, like

Which was a huge deal. Because I mean, it's like, you know, are you. Are you worshipping an idol? Because you purchase this stuff that had been. And Paul actually pretty clearly reveals his hand in that. He's on team meteor, you know. Yeah. Because he calls him weak. He says, you know, there are people who disagree with me are weak is essentially you know, when you read between the lines ign's there. But Paul is like I read just not press this, though, for the sake of of the unity that we need to have around more important things. It's it's almost like a gospel instinct. And I think that you know, again, I'm trying to play prophet or judge here. I think when you peel back some of the layers behind our disunity.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Which was a big deal back then.

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J.D. Greear: Which was a huge deal. Are you worshipping an idol because you purchase this stuff that had been? And Paul actually pretty clearly reveals his hand in that. He's on team meteor, you know. Because he calls him weak. He says, people who disagree with me that are weak, essentially, when you read between the lines there. But Paul is like, I'd rather just not press this, though, for the sake of the unity that we need to have around more important things. It's almost like a gospel

instinct. And I think that, again, I'm trying to play prophet or judge here. I think when you peel back some of the layers behind our disunity. It's not that we're we're too passionate about the things that we're disunifying over. It's that we're not passionate enough about the gospel and the unity of Christ's Body. There are reasons why I was like, I'm so grieved by that, we have two separate ways, but Jesus prayed in John 17 for this unified church that would present his gospel to the world. And I love that. I love seeing people, like my friend I just told you about, come to Christ. I love seeing people from different ethnicities and different backgrounds have this common salvation and I'm not willing to put truth on the chopping block for that.

But that desire for that thing puts the other stuff into the right categories. And I just wonder when I see some of this, it's not that you are too much about that. I don't think you care enough about the gospel, or about the flourishing of Christ's Body. And that's judgmental and prophetic. So I'm not talking about anybody in particular, but I think it's a factor.

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Carey Nieuwhof: So the SBC is not the only denomination that struggling.

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J.D. Greear: We're the only ones going to heaven, though.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, there you go. That's right. I'm glad you said that publicly. There's a bunch of them. And what do you see as some of the keys, and I think you've hinted at it already. So if it's just that you want to underline and we can move on. But, what are some keys to the future? Because denominations have really, and the SBC, Southern Baptists, are about as decentralized as you can get, right? Like, congregation-less churches, there's not this massive hierarchy or that kind of thing. It's pretty decentralized, but some of the denominations are quite centralized, etc.

Any cues for denominations on how to move forward in a world that is so fractionalized, where everyone has access to everyone else's information.

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J.D. Greear: Yeah. Well I mean it has. The game has changed a lot, and what we needed denominations for twenty years ago, we don't need, or certainly not a hundred years ago, and we need some new wineskins. Certainly to think about the right cooperation. What I would encourage people to think about is the value of

network and cooperation in the Body of Christ, especially for megachurches. You tend to think, "Oh I can just go it alone," and it ends up becoming siloed. That's where heresies grow. Because you're not having the right conversations with other leaders.

And it really, especially when it comes to overseas stuff, you're not nearly as effective as just being part of the larger Body. Tim Keller, who is the Yoda of our generation said in, I think it's Center Church, that in Christian history, there are movements and there are institutions. And he says they both need each other because an institution without movement is dead. You know, just empty religiosity. But a movement without institution lacks staying power. And we see this, you and I have both been in ministry long enough to see that somebody will come along and they're the latest, their message is really resonating, and they held a couple of big conferences, and everybody's talking about them and they're trending on Twitter.

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But then, without the institution behind it, it just tends to be like launching a stick of dynamite in the air.

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It goes off, everybody hears it, but 30 seconds later there's no evidence, anything happened.

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And so, for, in particular, the Southern Baptist Convention, you've got some whether it's mission board, or educational facilities, at the lowest point in the SBC's history that I remember personally, in my lifetime, when I felt like nothing was happening, Southern Baptist Seminaries were still putting out into ministry. It was like four to five thousand graduates a year who were going into full-time ministry positions. That is staying power, and that meant that when things were at their nadir as a convention, it was still, so I don't mind giving time to serve. I'm not wed to the institution.

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It's a tool I'm ready to walk away from if it's no longer profitable.

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But I think sometimes we can be shortsighted and not see that there really is a value in being a part of a network that builds something that has that staying

power. Rodney Stark, we already talked about him. I'll quote him one more time. He said, "The single greatest predictor of the future of any movement or denomination is how many young men and women they're raising up for ministry." And so at our lowest point in the SBC, we still had a really good engine for that. And ultimately, that's kind of what I think has led to a resurgence. And then I know that's a little iffy. There are a lot of things right now going on. So I wouldn't say this is an amazing time for Southern Baptists. But I think ultimately, you know, it's something I'm unhappy to be a part of.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah, you did mention social media, and I was going to ask the question in a different context in terms of the local church. But I think social media really has changed the game for how we talk to each other as leaders and as people on the same journey, on the same mission. Any thoughts on how we can better handle social media, whether that's at the macro-level leader to leader, or congregation to leader, because that seems to be where a lot of the bullets get fired these days.

[01:06:58.500]

J.D. Greear: Yeah. You know, I think in general, those are not great contexts for emotional relationships. I can't remember, you probably know it off the top of your head.

But they say that whenever you're in an emotionally charged discussion, only 7% of communication is verbal and 55% is body language, and the other whatever delta it is, is facial expression, and tone of voice, and you're deprived of all of that except for 7%. And it's not a good form for engagement. If it feels good for me to tweet it or post it, it probably is not right. It needs a different context. We have a saying for our preaching here, we just say, "no drive-bys" in sermons. And what we mean by that is, I'm not going to take a shot at anything controversial if I don't have time to really flesh it out.

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So, take gay marriage. I'm not just going to put that in a list of sins that I just throw out and move on. I need time to give that context. And so I think on social media, you're like, I'm just not going to do any drive-bys. That's not the forum that's made for that. I do think that social media, and the online stuff, I think it's really it's given us, I love how you talk about this a lot, Carey. It's given us - like the printing press - a whole new lease on sharing the gospel. Being a guy who's very committed to the in-

person local church, I'll still say that you're one of the things shifted for us in Covid and that needed to, is that we used to be a church that kind of had online options. Now, even though the local church is an in-person experience. We also recognize that for most people, their primary way of connection engagement, you know, maintaining their membership is digital first.

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You know, it's like that's the primary, that's the substance of how they connect to our church. And the in-person experience kind of flows out of that. I'm not rewriting theology there as much as I am just saying, practically, we've had to center some of those ways of engagement and communication, because that's just how people operate now. And if we don't change to that, then we're just losing audience with it. It's not serving anybody.

[01:08:42.000]

Carey Nieuwhof: In your new book, *Essential Christianity*, you don't spend a lot of time on it, but you do touch on deconstruction and I'd love to talk about that. So we talked about a lot of the challenges that the church is facing these days. How does what we're currently seeing in the church tie into deconstruction in your view?

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J.D. Greear: So, deconstruction raises some very important and necessary questions that quite honestly need to be asked. I mean, how much you know, the idea is, how much are your beliefs and your institutions and your power structures, how much have they been set up by the powerful to perpetuate the power of the powerful? Now certainly that conversation can go too far too quickly, but I think there are certain people that are asking, where has the historic institutional churches in the United States, where have they not only failed to speak prophetically, and be more gospel-centered than they were culture shaped, it's also, where have they actually perpetuated that and embodied that? And there a lot of people, and every pastor deals with them, and can think of faces when I say this.

People who have been hurt by the church and have a completely wrong view of who Jesus is and what Christianity is about because of the experiences they've had with Christians. That part of deconstruction is a really healthy conversation. But you know, it's kind of like C.S. Lewis said, and I actually quote this in the book, where in *The Abolition of Man*, he said, "The purpose of seeing through something is to see behind it." It's not just to go on seeing through things forever. And sometimes with deconstruction, it's just this endless kind of, "I'm always questioning everything.

And there's just really no way for me to know anything. And everything's a power grab." And you know, critical race theory and all the critical theories are just wrapped up in this huge discussion. And I think what I wanted to do with Essential Christianity was say, okay, even if I don't spend a long time on deconstruction when you see through some of these things, what you see is the apostles were not giving first an institution.

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Nor were they giving this really detailed way to live. Those things would grow out of this essential message that answered mankind's deepest questions that are true in the 1st century and in the 21st century. Well, I'd preached the book of Romans for a year, it's where this book came from. And I just what I did is, I pulled out 10 questions that Paul answers in the first 11 chapters of Romans. And then I looked and I was like, those are the exact same questions that UNC Chapel Hill students are asking. How do I know there's a God? If there is a God, why doesn't everybody believe in him? It seems like if there were a God, it would just be more obvious. Why do so many people have different opinions? Paul deals with that. Aren't all religions basically the same? He deals with that in Romans 3 and 4, then if Christianity is true then why is it so hard for me? Seems like if it were true it would just come a lot more naturally. And what about the Christian view of sexuality and these things.

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So, when I saw those questions as what Paul wanted to say, this essential gospel truth is the answer to these questions. I thought. Well, I mean maybe that would be something that would be helpful for our students here and our young professionals sharing Christ with somebody else. Years ago, I read this thing Martin Luther said where he said, "Never aspire to teach the church at large, just teach your church, and if the church at large feels like you got something to say to it, it'll come to you." So I wrote this book for our church as a tool and The Good Book Company said, hey, I think this actually could be helpful for others. So that's the book story.

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Carey Nieuwhof: And when you're talking about that, I'm sure 90% of people tend to agree, like, completely agree with, those are really good questions to answer, and I think if we can just answer those questions, we're all going to be further ahead. I want to ask you a couple more questions before we wrap up. One is what are the critics of the church write about in your view?

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J.D. Greear: They are right that a lot of times, we serve the interest of power before we've served the gospel. They wouldn't phrase it that way. But they have seen that a lot of our institutions were designed to preserve the status quo. And I think we have to acknowledge that. We are a people that, like you and I talked about earlier, we have a lot of the same idolatry problems and the same flesh problems that everybody else does. What I think they're wrong about. Did you ask me what they're wrong about or just what they're right about?

[01:14:07.900]

Carey Nieuwhof: Yeah. What do you think critics are right about, and then the next question was going to be, what are they wrong about?

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J.D. Greear: Okay. Yeah. So what they're wrong about is that, a lot of times, it's easy for them to attribute our fleshly errors and our historic mistakes to what we believe versus the fact that we all share the same sinful flesh that corrupts basically everything. Including the institutions that we lead. That's especially a tragedy in the church, but it's true. I mean, to circle back real quick to abuse, that's one of the really difficult things that you have to show people about abuse, is that we for a long time, you know, Evangelical Protestants said, well, that's a Catholic issue, and that's because they don't let Priests get married. And that abuse stuff is only them. And listen, I think ideas have consequences. I'm not a fan of celibacy and ministry as a forced thing. So yes, ideas have consequences, but the issue is any human being in a place of power, unchecked, is going to find ways to manipulate and abuse.

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And when somebody looks at Christians and they say, well because you believe in complementarianism, you believe in you know leadership in the home and in the church and you recognize this distinction of roles that that that leads to abuse, you say, well what's going to happen is that's going to make you blind to where it can happen right there where you are. And I think a lot of critics don't realize that what our message has been, and shame on us because we should have said this a lot more clearly, our message has been that there really is hope only in Christ, and if there's been a redemptive thing at work in our churches, it's that the gospel over time, eventually will win out even against our errors and our mistakes, whether it's abuse, or in the SPC in particular.

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You know, just some of their horrendous views on race. You know what you see is that, eventually, the gospel, the truth of the gospel, won out over that. And what we want to say, what the critics are wrong about, is the gospel is the hope of this. All the things that bother you about our inconsistencies, they're actually addressed in the gospel, and our hope is the gospel, and your hope can be in the gospel, too, because that's really the hope that's there for all of us.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Anything else you want to share? Anything else on your mind?

[01:17:21.700]

J.D. Greear: Well, I'm excited about all these things I'm hearing. Just in little spots of awakening here. When I go back and read the stories of the awakenings in our country, they always came on a really, really dark time. And in some ways, Carey, I feel like this is a dark time because what's happening politically and all the scandal stories in the church. Andy Erwin, who's the producer of the Jesus Revolution movie that came out, he's a friend and in that movie, he was saying the hopelessness that most of us, I wasn't even around for it. It was before I was born but the hopelessness that the Christian community felt in the late 1960s because of the cultural revolution. I've heard, he said, that it felt as dark as it feels right now. And that's when the Jesus Revolution happened.

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And I'm just like man, God send it again. Is this the time that we're ready for an awakening? If so, I'm putting my sail up. I'm ready for the gale force wind.

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Carey Nieuwhof: Well, I'm ready for that moment. I'll tell you that. J.D. the book is called Essential Christianity. It's available anywhere you can get books, but where can people track with you these days online?

[01:18:51.700]

J.D. Greear: Yeah, JD Greear. Strangest spelling in the world, I know. But JDGreer.com is the easiest place to do it, and I'll try not to angry tweet so you can follow me at @jdgreer on Twitter.

[01:19:00.200]

Carey Nieuwhof: That's great. J.D. thanks so much for your time today, and thanks so much for sharing what you shared.

[01:19:00.200]

J.D. Greear: Thanks for having me, Carey.

[01:19:01.100]

Carey Nieuwhof: I hope you really enjoyed that conversation. I certainly did. And if you want more, and there is a lot more, just go to the show notes. It's careynieuwhof.com/episode569. We've got transcripts there for you as well. You know the other thing I love about transcripts for podcasts? They're searchable. So if you're like, what was that point on? You just search a keyword. Boom. You got it. And a couple of things to tell you about before we go. First of all, I have got some help for you. You know that about 22% of pastors say that they really feel supported in leadership. And I would like to get in your corner. I've got a training program called The Art of Team Leadership that's helped thousands of church leaders figure out how to create a thriving team culture and end bad meetings with that person you don't like meeting with, get rid of toxic people who are ruining your culture, and stop losing your best leaders. If you're interested in any of that, go to theartofteamleadership.com, and discover how you can get access to my training program for only \$17.00.

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And make sure you check out Gloop's free texting service. Kingdom-minded donors have made this free for churches across the U.S. Go to get.gloop.us/texting to sign up today. Next episode, man, I'm so excited to have Vance Roush back on. He's a young entrepreneur from Silicon Valley, also a church leader, and here's an excerpt:

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Vance Roush: And so, actually playing not to lose in a Silicon Valley mindset doesn't do anything. It actually is better if you fail fast so that you could learn, or even honestly, shut that thing down and start again rather than just sitting in this kind of mediocre line,

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Carey Nieuwhof: We're going to talk all about the entrepreneurial journey and we're going to talk about what's changing in finance, how to raise more money, and why Millennials may actually be the most generous generation you've ever encountered. I know, that's a surprise. Also coming up, Michael Hyatt and

Megan Hyatt Miller, Seth Godin, Dr. Henry Cloud is back. We got Kenny Jane coming up on the podcast. Paula Faris Kyle, Idleman, Kevin Kelly, Jon Acuff, Judah and Chelsea Smith, and Sharon McMahan. Very excited for all of this coming up on the podcast. And if you haven't subscribed yet, please do so. You will get every episode automatically. And one question for you, before we go,

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And one question for you before we go. Would you like to get a free newsletter every Friday that I send out to over 85,000 leaders, containing some of the most curious, interesting, and helpful content on faith, culture, the future church, and other things that really catch my eye. For example, I recently shared a Tim Keller article, I think is absolutely fascinating on the disappearance of the front porch and what it's doing to church and unchurched people. I also shared a theory that Ernest Hemingway had about what you should share when you speak or write publicly and a whole lot more. Anyway, these are curious things I've found. And we are getting a great response to the On the Rise newsletter. You can get it for free. You can start anytime you can stop anytime.

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You're only going to find it if you subscribe and you can do that at ontherisenewsletter.com today.

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Thank you so much for listening, everybody. Hope you're having a fantastic spring. I am really enjoying getting back out on my bike again. It's been a minute. And wherever you are, hey, I'm in your corner. Thank you so much for listening. Share this with a friend and I hope our time together today has helped you identify and break a growth barrier you're facing.